I381.3
METE
c.3

07231907

ILLINOIS CONSUMER AND HOMEMAKING EDUCATION PROGRAM:
An Assessment of Program Response to Family Needs

Metered Utilities

ILLINOIS DOCUMENTS
1980
ILLINOIS STATE LIBRARY

CHEP families' utility costs are an ever-increasing percentage of their limited monthly income. It is not uncommon for CHEP homemakers to have utility bills that require much of their monthly income. Thus, utility education has been a high priority in the CHEP program for the last four years.

CHEP paraprofessionals teach their program homemakers two series of lessons on utilities. They are: "Be in the Know About Utilities" and "Utilities and You." For this section of the survey, only homemakers who had one or both of these series of lessons were asked to respond. A total of 177 homemakers answered all or part of the utility questions.

The questions were designed to find out if the homemakers read their bills, take meter readings, compare their own meter reading with that of the utility company, look for errors in their bills, and make complaints about billing errors.

Almost 71 percent (120) of the homemakers said they "regularly" open their utility bills promptly when they come in the mail. Nearly 26 percent (43) said they "sometimes" do this. Only 4.1 percent (7) of them responded "not very often" or "never" to this question.

Approximately 89 percent (154) of the homemakers said they "regularly" or "sometimes" read carefully most of the information printed on their utility bill.

The majority of the homemakers take meter readings for electricity and gas. Fifty-eight percent (89) and 65 percent (78) responded "regularly" or "sometimes" for electricity and gas, respectively. Slightly less than half, however, did so for their water meter.*

The same was true for comparing their own meter reading with the company's. Slightly more than half did so for electricity and gas, but only 42 percent did so for the water meter.

Eighty-one percent (134) of those responding, reported that they "regularly" or "sometimes" look for errors in their utility bill. And 73 percent (112) said they complain to the company if they find an error.

Almost 91 percent (147) of the respondents said they "regularly" or "sometimes" pay their utility bills on or before the due date when they have the money.

Approximately 86 percent (139) of the homemakers said they "regularly" or "sometimes" budget in advance to pay their utility bills. Only 13.7 percent (22) of the homemakers responded "not very often" about budgeting to pay the utility bills.

A summary of homemakers' responses to the utility questions is presented in table 9.

*These percentages are lower because many homemakers do not have access to their meters.

TABLE 9

HOMEMAKER'S RESPONSES TO UTILITY QUESTIONS

Survey question	Regularly		Sometimes		Not very often		Never	
	Number	*Percent*	*Number*	*Percent*	*Number*	*Percent*	*Number*	*Percent*
Open bills promptly	120	70.6%	43	25.3%	2	1.2%	5	2.9%
Reads bills	107	61.8	47	27.1	13	7.5	6	3.4
Takes meter reading for:								
Electricity	48	31.3	41	26.7	22	14.3	42	27.4
Gas	39	32.7	39	32.7	12	10.0	29	24.3
Water	20	25.0	16	20.0	7	8.7	37	46.2
Compares utility company reading with own reading for:								
Electricity	36	25.8	36	25.8	27	19.4	40	28.7
Gas	31	27.6	32	28.5	21	18.7	28	25.0
Water	18	23.6	14	18.4	9	11.8	35	46.0
Looks for error in bills	95	57.5	39	23.6	17	10.3	14	8.4
Complains to company about errors	82	53.5	30	19.6	27	17.6	14	9.1
Pays utility bills on or before due date, if possible	108	66.6	39	24.0	8	4.9	7	4.3
Budgets in advance to pay utility bills	117	72.6	22	13.6	5	3.1	17	10.5

Impact of CHEP Utility Lessons on Homemakers

As a control group, CHEP homemakers who had never had the utility lessons were interviewed to determine the impact of the CHEP lessons on program homemakers. The results of the sample of homemakers who did **not** have the CHEP lessons was compared to those who **did** have the CHEP lessons to observe if there was any difference between the two groups. The results are presented in tables 10A and 10B. Homemakers responses' of "regularly" or "sometimes" to the survey questions were categorized in table 10A as positive responses. The responses "not very often" or "never" were categorized in table 10B as the number of negative responses.

Of CHEP homemakers surveyed who have had the utilities lessons, 96 percent (163) open their bills promptly, compared to 72.4 percent (108) who have not had the lessons.

Twenty-seven percent (41) not having the lessons report not opening their bills compared to 4 percent (7) having the lessons.

A large difference was also noted regarding whether or not the homemaker reads the utility bills. Eighty-nine percent (154) of those having the lessons, compared to 68.8 percent (102) who did not have the lessons, reported reading their bills. Thirty-one percent (46) of those not having the lessons reported that they do not read their bills, compared to 11 percent (19) of those having the lesson.

After having the lessons, over 58 percent (89) of the homemakers take their electricity meter readings. Of the homemakers not having the lessons, less than 38 percent (57) take their readings. After taking the readings, homemakers are encouraged to compare their readings with the companies. Homemakers who had the lessons report that over 51 percent (72) do compare the readings. Of the homemakers not having the lessons, 26 percent (38) compare these readings.

The percent increase in positive responses for those homemakers who studied the CHEP lessons is shown in table 10A. The corresponding percent decrease in negative responses is shown in table 10B.

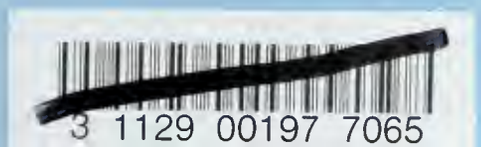
3 1129 00197 7065

TABLE 10 A

COMPARISON OF HOMEMAKERS' RESPONSES WITH AND WITHOUT CHEP UTILITY LESSONS

(Number of positive responses*)

Survey questions	Sample of CHEP homemakers not having had utility lessons		Sample of CHEP homemakers having had utility lessons		Percentage Increase
	Number	*Percent*	*Number*	*Percent*	
Opens bills promptly	108	72.4%	163	95.9%	+23.5%
Reads bills	102	68.8	154	89.0	+20.2
Takes meter reading for:					
Electricity	57	37.5	89	58.1	+20.6
Gas	38	29.5	78	65.5	+36.0
Water	10	9.7	36	45.0	+35.3
Compares utility company reading with own reading for:					
Electricity	38	26.2	72	51.8	+25.6
Gas	29	22.3	63	56.2	+33.9
Water	9	8.2	32	42.1	+33.9
Looks for error in bills	94	61.8	134	81.2	+19.4
Complains to company about errors	82	54.7	112	73.2	+18.5
Pays utility bills on or before due date, if possible	122	79.2	147	90.7	+11.5
Budgets in advance to pay utility bills	118	75.1	139	86.3	+11.2

*Possible responses were: "regularly," "sometimes," "not very often," or "never." "Regularly" and "sometimes" here are considered positive responses.

TABLE 10 B

COMPARISON OF HOMEMAKERS' RESPONSES WITH AND WITHOUT CHEP UTILITY LESSONS

(Number of negative responses*)

Survey question	Sample of CHEP homemakers not having had utility lessons		Sample of CHEP homemakers having had utility lessons		Percentage decrease
	Number	*Percent*	*Number*	*Percent*	
Opens bills promptly	41	27.5%	7	4.1%	—23.4%
Reads bills	46	31.0	19	11.0	—20.0
Takes meter readings for:					
Electricity	95	62.5	64	41.8	—36.1
Water	93	90.3	44	55.0	—35.3
Compares utility company reading with own reading for:					
Electricity	107	73.8	67	48.2	—25.6
Gas	101	77.7	49	43.8	—33.9
Water	100	91.7	44	57.9	—33.8
Looks for error in bills	58	38.1	31	18.8	—19.3
Complains to company about errors	68	45.3	41	26.8	—18.5
Pays utility bills on or before due date, if possible	32	20.8	15	9.2	—11.6
Budgets in advance to pay utility bills	39	24.8	22	13.7	—11.1

*Possible responses were "regularly," "sometimes," "not very often," or "never." "Not very often" or "never" are here considered negative responses.

Concepts Learned

The homemakers were also asked what was the most important concept they learned about utilities from the CHEP lessons. Twenty-seven percent (27) said "how to read meters" was the most important. Eighteen percent (18) said "how to check for errors on bills," 17 percent (17) said "the importance of paying bills on time," 16 percent (16) responded "how to read the bills," and 13 percent (13) thought "the importance of reading bills promptly" was most important.

The number of responses for each item mentioned is shown in table 11.

TABLE 11

HOMEMAKER'S RESPONSES TO MOST IMPORTANT CONCEPTS LEARNED ABOUT UTILITIES

	Number	*Percent (n = 99)*
How to read meters	27	27.2%
How to check for errors on bills	18	18.1
Importance of paying bills on time	17	17.1
How to read bill	16	16.1
Importance of reading bills promptly	13	13.1
How to compare meter readings	8	8.0
Where to go for help (ICC)	5	5.0
Mistakes can be made	5	5.0
How to budget for utility bills	4	4.0
How to make a complaint	3	3.0
Miscellaneous	4	4.0

*Multiple responses were allowed.

Dollars Saved

Homemakers were asked if they had utility bill errors corrected, and if so, how many dollars it saved them.

A total of $1,388 dollars was reported by 61 homemakers as being saved as a result of having utility bill errors corrected. The reported amounts ranged from one dollar to $250.

The distribution of dollars saved by county is shown in table 12.

TABLE 12

HOMEMAKERS HAVING UTILITY BILL ERRORS CORRECTED AND DOLLAR AMOUNT SAVED AS A RESULT

	Number of homemakers	*Percent of county total*	*Total dollars saved*	*Average dollars saved*
Madison-St. Clair (n = 22)	10	45.4%	$ 154	$15.40
Cook—Area I (n = 49)	14	28.6	449	32.00
Cook—Area III (n = 23)	5	21.7	289	58.00
Jackson (n = 16)	7	43.7	31	4.42
Pulaski-Alexander (n = 68)	25	36.8	465	18.60
All counties	**61**	**34.3%**	**$1,388**	**$22.75**

ILLINOIS STATE LIBRARY

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA
3 0112 121892902

Karen E. Craig, Assistant Director-Cooperative Extension Service, Home Economics
Jane Scherer, Project Coordinator-CHEP
Sharon Litherland, Extension Assistant-CHEP
Lynn Eslinger, Extension Assistant-CHEP
Betty Ann Barnett, Family Resource Management Specialist-CHEP

A special thank you to the following people for providing expertise and guidance in this study: Beatrice H. Bagby, Family Life Specialist; Judy Henerfauth, Consumer Education Specialist; Susan Raines, Evaluation Consultant; and the CHEP Extension Advisers: Georgette Buckhalter, Carolyn Kerns, Ruth Kessel, Edna Schiller and Janice Threw. We are grateful for the help of the CHEP paraprofessionals who worked diligently on this project and the program homemakers who have shared so much with us.

Acknowledgment is given to the Illinois State Board of Education, Department of Adult, Vocational and Technical Education for financial assistance, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Cooperative Extension Service, 1980, College of Agriculture/State/County/Local Groups/U.S.D.A. cooperating. The Illinois Cooperative Extension Service provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.